

The marvel of marble

Edmund Thomas

Although we often think of Ancient Rome in gleaming white splendour, in fact it was a city of Aglorious technicolour, with marbles and other stones from around the empire creating a mosaic of different hues. But was this multi-coloured city just pleasing on the eye, or did the use of particular materials carry greater significance? Edmund Thomas asks this intri-guing question of a piece of stone which was not grandly displayed but trampled under foot many times a day, the threshold of the Pantheon.

Magnificent marble

Of the thousands of visitors pouring each day through the open doorway of the Pantheon in Rome, almost none pauses to watch where they tread. But beneath their feet is one of the marvels of antiquity, the largest yet known single block of coloured marble, and it still stands where it was originally installed, 1900 years ago.

This material, known geologically as a breccia, is a composite rock consisting of fragments of white, grey, and, above all, pink marble, in crystals of varying sizes, embedded in a black, dark green, or greyish matrix. By the seventeenth century it had become known as 'Africano' because of its mainly dark colour rather than because it came from the continent of Africa. We now know, in fact, that it was quarried near Teos on the western coast of Asia Minor in modern Turkey. But, regardless of its name or origin, the real interest of this stone lies in trying to understand why it was set up at the entrance into the Pantheon rotunda and what it signified.

The use of this highly select product of imperially owned quarries appears to have been jealously guarded, to the extent that it occurs far more at Rome and in Italy than in its native Asia Minor. There was more than mere luxury at stake here. What did stepping over a piece of Africano marble into the Pantheon mean to ancient viewers?

Deluxe and diverse doorways

In the ancient eastern Mediterranean the threshold was synonymous with what we call liminality, the ritual passage from one state to another; the word is derived from the Latin word for 'threshold', *limen*. It marked a transition from the profane to the sacred and for that reason was constructed of the most precious materials: in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, bronze; in Persia, a polished dark limestone; in

Egypt, basalt; and, in the Greek city states from the sixth century B.C., marble. At Naxos a marble threshold gave access to the temple *naos*; at Bassae the *pronaos* was separated from the interior by grilles resting on marble sills, a rare use of the material in the building which further highlighted the significance of that main passage into the temple by contrast with the limestone threshold of the side entrance to the east; at Corinth, in the 4th century B.C., the threshold of the east door into the Temple of Apollo was of white, apparently Pentelic marble, a luxury barely used elsewhere in the building; in the Temple of Zeus at Nemea, where white marble was generally more prevalent, black marble was used for the threshold of the cella door; at Icaria in Attica the threshold was even inscribed, signalling to visitors that they were now entering 'the Pythion of the Icarians'.

In the Roman world continued importance was attached to the threshold as a marker of difference between sacred and profane, on which it was propitious for worshippers to tread *dextro pede* ('with right foot first'). The Christian Tertullian mocked the fact that for the Romans even the doors had their gods: 'Cardea, named after the hinges (*cardines*); Forculus, after the folding panels (*fores*); Limentinus, after the threshold (*limen*); and Janus, after the door itself (*ianua*)' (*De Idol.* 15).

Bronze is best?

But there was one material in a threshold which, even if it seldom found its way into built form, still in the imagination held intimations of the divine more than any other substance and aroused corresponding feelings of awe: bronze. The assumption of a threshold in this material underlies both Thetis' description of the house of Zeus as 'bronze-stepped' and the citizen of Colonus' account to Oedipus of the entrance to Hades as 'bronze-footed road of this earth, bulwark of Athens'. Some

mythical human properties had the same demarcating feature: the site of Agamemnon's tent at Aulis was still identified by its bronze threshold in the second century A.D.; and the palace of Alcinous was 'bronze-stepped', like Zeus' house. The impact of this element as a transitional rite of passage is clear from the Homeric account:

Meanwhile Odysseus went to the famous palace of Alcinous, and his heart was full of many thoughts as he stood there before crossing the threshold of bronze. For there was a gleam, as from the sun or the moon, through the high-roofed hall of great-hearted Alcinous.'
(*Odyssey* 7.81–85)

Romans too knew the significance of this material. In 296 B.C. the proceeds of fines were used, among other things, to set up 'bronze thresholds on the Capitoline' (Livy 10.23.12) marking access to what was the supreme religious location in the city.

Magical marbles

If bronze was the highest level of material display, marbles opened ancient viewers' eyes into a world of the imagination where colours meant more than the simple hues and shades they saw.

Already this could be seen in the Augustan city where Augustus chose to adorn the floor of the Temple of Mars Ultor in his own Forum with a rich tapestry of coloured marbles representing the enormous geographical reach of the Roman empire. To tread on pavements of Euboean 'cipollino' in bath buildings with its onion-like strands of green was to walk over the waves of the sea; entering a nymphaeum lined with slabs of green Thessalian marble was to see the foliage of trees surrounding the legendary valley of Tempe; walls draped in Phrygian 'pavonazzetto', a marble characterized by

violet stripes, seemed tinged with purple dye; columns of yellow North African 'giallo antico' were like golden pillars, floors cut in green 'serpentino' from the Peloponnese like grass. 'Africano' marble too was part of this imaginative world.

Marble as metal?

Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, and its colour varies according to the copper content: bronze with the highest copper content has a pinkish hue; with 90% copper content it has a red tinge; with 87% copper content it looks yellow; and at 68% it is ash grey. Chemical analysis of ancient statues has shown examples all across this range.

In the breccia quarried at Teos in Asia Minor the Romans found a mineral which could emulate the varied visual properties of bronze, with prominent pink, red, yellow, and grey areas all in one stone. In combining these colours, 'Africano' marble stood for the versatility and changeability of bronze.

Around the same time, the introduction of red *sigillata* pottery across the West, instead of the previous black, has been explained by a desire to recreate in everyday households a semblance of the gold that was becoming more visible after Pompey's conquests in the East; so the dark pink and black patches of polished blocks or slabs of 'Africano' breccia could have provided a meaningful substitute for the bronze thresholds of mythology.

As one entered the Pantheon (left), between the bronze pilasters and through the bronze doors, by stepping on this marble block one crossed a figurative bronze threshold that showed one was entering a house of the gods, like the bronze threshold of Dido's temple of Juno at Carthage beneath its bronze doors (Virg. *Aen.* 1.448–9). Placed at the tangent between the circle of the rotunda and the rectilinear porch, this block of marble 'bronze' marked the transition from the grid-like regularity of the Campus Martius outside to the cosmos-like sphere within.

Marble/Bronze in Rome and beyond

In the 30s B.C. columns of this material were erected in the rebuilt Temple of Apollo beside the Circus Flaminius, the so-called 'Apollo Sosianus', and on two levels in the central aisle of the Basilica Aemilia (above). Polished and glowing in the evening sunshine that streamed through the buildings, they could be imagined as bronze columns, in clear colour contrast to their white marble Corinthian capitals, carved, in Apollo's temple, with the god's tripod.

The strips of 'Africano' between panels of pink Chian 'Portasanta' marble (now so

called because of its use for the doorposts of the Porta Santa in St Peter's) on Caesar's new Rostra in the Roman Forum looked like overlaid bronze strap-work. Just behind that, the threshold of the Temple of Concord (above), where Tiberius stood in A.D. 10 holding the right-hand door jamb of the cella as he dedicated the building, consisted of two long blocks of marble side by side, one carved with a small image of Mercury's staff (*caduceus*); now much discoloured by the wearing of time, what has long been thought to be 'Portasanta' because of its pinkish patches is now, in fact, recognised as 'Africano' too.

We have already noted the extensive use of coloured marbles by Augustus in his own Forum. In the Temple of Mars Ultor there a substantial platform of concrete and broken marbles spans the entrance to the cella which once supported one block of marble like that in the Pantheon. Which marble this was can now only be guessed as it has long ago been robbed, but the case for 'Africano' may be supported by the material's use elsewhere in Augustus' forum, for the columns of the exedra (below) which framed bronze statues of the *summi viri* (the great men of the past). The Pantheon may have resembled this Augustan example in the material chosen for the threshold as it did in so many other details.

We see the same choice at Ostia: the most prominent temple of the Antonine cityscape, overlooking the forum, had a threshold composed of a single block of 'Africano' almost as large as the Pantheon's (right and below). By that date, though, the quarry was producing its last slabs and columns.

More lasting than bronze

Uniquely among marbles, columns and other large blocks of 'Africano' were frequently subject to later repair, patched up with extensive inlay or intarsia to remedy defects, as if to preserve their image of a bronze-like appearance. The Pantheon threshold is no exception.

By contrast, most real bronze works barely survived the fall of Rome. They were melted down in late antiquity, particularly in the fifth and sixth centuries. The bronze doors of the Pantheon are composed of bronze sheets nailed onto wooden frames, the result of a restoration by Pope Pius IV in 1563.

But the Pantheon's 'bronze threshold' of 'Africano' marble remained in place to mark the boundary between the world outside and that within. As in the poet Horace's vision (*Odes* 3.30.1), this marble work has proved itself no surrogate, but 'a monument more everlasting than bronze'.

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